

SENATOR JOHN ENSIGN  
MESSAGE TO THE LEGISLATURE OF NEVADA  
SEVENTY-FOURTH SESSION, 2007

Speaker Buckley, Majority Leader Raggio, members of the Senate and Assembly, Governor Gibbons and other constitutional officers, distinguished guests, and my fellow Nevadans:

I am honored to be here with you today at this moment of great opportunity and promise. In Nevada and Washington, D.C., we face the challenge of reaching out to members of the opposite party to make progress and improve the quality of life for all Americans. Throughout time, men and women have nobly answered this call and changed history.

Two hundred years ago this week, the struggle of a leader in Great Britain finally resulted in victory with a vote by the House of Commons to abolish the horrific slave trade. William Wilberforce had been the voice of the antislavery movement for more than two decades. He introduced his antislavery legislation every single session of Parliament, worked every possible angle, and was ridiculed and targeted for his commitment to the cause. His health deteriorated during the course of his advocacy, but his passion did not.

William Wilberforce was admired for his ability to work with philosophical opponents for the greater good. One of his favorite sayings was, "Measures, not men." In this capitol, and in our nation's capitol, we must commit ourselves to crossing the great political divide for the greater good.

I want to start off by congratulating our senior Senator, Harry Reid, now the Majority Leader of the United States Senate. I am very proud of my good friend for what he has accomplished. My Republican colleagues have entrusted me with the chairmanship of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, and we have two members now on the House Ways and Means Committee. Nevada has truly never known such political influence in its history. Senator Reid and I have worked together on many Nevada initiatives over the years to improve the quality of life for our constituents. We have been so successful because we have been willing—along with the rest of the Nevada delegation—to put aside our philosophical differences and party loyalties and do what is best for Nevada.

Our delegation is well positioned to continue that work. In fact, Nevada is in the best position ever to put the brakes on the Yucca Mountain project and finally shut down that money pit of deceitful management and bad science.

I feel very blessed to have been exposed to so much of our state throughout my life. My childhood memories are of growing up in Reno, Carson, Lake Tahoe, and later in Las Vegas. This state has been home to my family for more than 100 years. There is no place like it in the world. All the things that I love about Nevada are the same reasons that thousands continue to move to our state each month. It is the quality of life that we all cherish so deeply.

The lands bills that Senator Reid and I, along with then-Congressman Gibbons, have written over the past six years were born out of the desire to protect and enhance the quality of life throughout Nevada. Our most recent bill, the White Pine County Lands bill, is a perfect example.

The White Pine County Lands bill, like the other laws, was crafted in cooperation with citizens holding many different views. The bill designates 550,000 acres of wilderness, but it also allows 45,000 acres of BLM land to be privatized. Land sale proceeds will go to funding White Pine County law enforcement, fire protection, transportation, and natural resource planning. So far, with all of the lands bills that we have done, the general education fund for the state has received \$150 million to this point.

The quality-of-life benefits extend to every corner of the state. The White Pine measure also includes a ten-year authorization for a comprehensive hazardous fuels reduction program at Lake Tahoe, throughout the eastern Sierras, and the Spring Mountains in southern Nevada. It also has funds to acquire and protect portions of the Ballardini Ranch in Washoe County, the acceleration of over a billion dollars in parks and trails in southern Nevada, and the construction of a new reservoir to conserve three million acre-feet of water from the Colorado River.

These projects will make a tremendous difference in the lives of generations of Nevadans to come. They ensure that our natural resources are protected and that we are prepared for continued growth.

The innovative thinking that has made these bills so successful is the same kind of thinking we need to tackle other challenges facing our state—namely traffic congestion. The gridlock haunting many of our daily commutes puts our families in danger, stifles businesses, and harms our air quality. State, county, and local legislators can no longer look to Washington, D.C., for a blank check to fix these problems. The Highway Trust Fund is now paying out 100 percent of what it brings in. It is time to be open to finding innovative solutions. While the federal government will remain a partner, our state must explore every option to reduce gridlock as we look to improve the quality of life for all our constituents.

Innovation, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness have been the cornerstones of our state's progress and popularity for many decades. Today, we need to inspire a new generation of young people to be innovative and to be competitive. Our students and businesses are no longer competing with just California and Arizona. They are up against people in China, India, and across the globe. And we must prepare them to meet that challenge.

I have spent a great deal of time over the past two years on legislation promoting competitiveness and innovation, which impact Nevada's future economic strength and how we can prepare students for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century workforce. Working together, we must do all we can to attract more high-tech companies and scientific researchers to our state. Last year, I convened high-tech summits in Las Vegas and Reno in order to bring

technology leaders together with educators, elected officials, chambers of commerce, and business development leaders.

These businesses and researchers foster innovation and the new ideas, technologies, and processes that lead to better jobs, higher wages, and a higher standard of living. Unfortunately, in the fields responsible for innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—America is steadily losing its global edge.

Last Congress, I introduced the bipartisan National Competitiveness Investment Act to address innovation and competitiveness challenges faced by our country. It focuses on three primary areas: increasing research investment; fostering science, technology, engineering, and mathematics talent; and developing an innovation infrastructure.

All of you know, I think, that I am a fiscal conservative. But every dollar we invest at the federal level in basic research is a dollar that will come back to us in spades in terms of stimulating economic activity and helping to keep the United States and Nevada at the forefront of global innovation.

The National Competitiveness Investment Act also addresses the need to encourage more American students from elementary school through graduate school to pursue careers in science, engineering, and mathematics, like we see at the Davidson Academy at UNR. The bill strengthens the skills of thousands of math and science teachers by establishing new undergraduate and graduate training programs.

Just this afternoon, I met with Dr. Benjamin Tayahi. He has his Ph.D. in electrical engineering and is an assistant professor at UNR. He has recognized the important need to engage students and inspire them in the areas of math, science, and engineering—especially for minority students. His Saturday Engineering Academy is fueled, 100 percent, by volunteers. Students have access to cutting-edge technology at UNR and receive hands-on experience.

It is really important that all of us focus on changing our educational system to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Other countries have scientists and mathematicians teaching science and math. In the United States, we mostly have education majors teaching science and math. If your passion is in science and math, you have a better chance of translating that passion to your students. I have talked to the presidents of UNR and UNLV and our community colleges about trying to transform the way we teach our teachers. The University of Texas at Austin has a program called "You Teach." It is innovative. They are actually taking science majors and teaching them to be teachers. The results, so far, have been very promising. The University of California system is going along with this same kind of model. It is time for Nevada to take the lead in the country to try to change the way we are teaching science and math teachers so that we can inspire the next generation of Nevadans.

Let me mention another issue being debated in Washington, D.C., that has a tremendous potential to increase our global competitiveness. When it comes to broadband deployment, we are falling behind the rest of the world.

The country that invented the Internet should not be sixteenth in the world when it comes to broadband deployment. Here in the State Legislature, you have a unique chance to help improve this situation and at the same time bring consumers more choices in video service.

Advances in technology now allow traditional cable or phone companies to get into each other's lines of business. This brings consumers another option for local phone service, and by introducing new competition, it creates better service, more features, and better prices.

And technology now makes it possible for telephone companies to get into the video business. However, our outdated laws make it a very cumbersome, expensive, and lengthy process. The federal legislation seems to be stalled at this point, so I would encourage you all to join the nine states that have passed legislation to streamline video franchising rules to encourage the deployment of video services. Video competition will be great for consumers and result in exciting new services.

The opportunity to compete with cable and satellite in the video market is the key to spurring the investment in these broadband networks. The fiber optic networks that will bring Nevadans video services will mean dramatically increased broadband speeds that are critical to keeping us competitive globally.

While I will continue to push for legislation at the federal level, I urge you to work together this year to bring competition and investment to our state.

We have also taken great strides in improving the quality of life for our honorable veterans. I was proud to be at the groundbreaking ceremony in southern Nevada for the new VA medical center and hospital in North Las Vegas last year and look forward, with great anticipation, to the grand opening in 2011. We are also preparing for a community-based outpatient clinic in Fallon in the fall and continued improvements in health care for veterans in Elko.

I also believe that we must provide for our veterans' healthcare needs because without their sacrifice and service, very simply, none of us would have the freedoms that we cherish. But there is still much more work to be done. We need a state veterans' nursing home in northern Nevada to complement the one in southern Nevada. As fast as our state is growing, we need to expand the state veterans' cemeteries in Boulder City and Fernley. I know these are ambitious goals, but they are the very least we can do for the champions of our democracy.

A brave, new generation of future veterans is defending our freedom and fighting for our security every day, across the world. They, and their families, have made unbelievable

sacrifices for our families and for our future. And there is no shortage of heroes or heroic efforts from this great state.

As I stand before you tonight, 376 men and women of the Nevada National Guard are serving around the world in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, including one of my staff members whom I am very proud of, Mark Sprinkle. Along with countless Nevadans in other branches of the military, they are the great defenders of democracy and freedom. They have answered the call to protect and defend our nation, and we are so proud of their commitment to this noble cause.

Roughly 100 soldiers from Fallon, Yerington, Reno, Las Vegas, and Carson City are performing escort security duty in Iraq right now. These soldiers were all previously deployed to Fort Irwin, California. Not one of these soldiers had to go to Iraq, but every single one of them volunteered to go. There are many other Nevadans who have volunteered as well.

At Nellis Air Force Base, Air Force active duty and reserve airmen, as well as Nevada Air guardsmen, are working together to play a critical role in fighting this war against radical, Islamic extremists. They are piloting the unmanned, armed Predator spy planes. The Predators have been vital to finding and killing terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan. Last year, this Nevada team of active, reserve, and guard members participated in 470 raids, surveyed almost 16,000 targets, logged more than 40,000 flying hours, and completed more than 2,000 sorties.

And the actions of our Nevada servicemen and-women are nothing short of heroic. Next week, four airmen from Nellis will be awarded the Bronze Star Medal and four will receive the Army Commendation Medal for their service in Iraq. As members of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Flight, they engaged in more than 700 combat missions, destroyed almost 400,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance, and cleared tens of thousands of miles of strategic highway.

Technical Sergeant Michael Bibb manually cleared a vital road of Improvised Explosive Devices, or IEDs, with a battle raging only 500 meters from his location. Staff Sergeant David Fitzpatrick manually cleared a landing zone in minutes so that a MEDEVAC helicopter could land and transport the wounded. And Staff Sergeant Krumlinde evacuated an innocent Iraqi family, defeated a timed IED that had been placed next to their home, and saved their lives and their home.

This is the courage we have seen time and again from Nevada's men and women in uniform. But they do not serve alone. Their families have also shown great bravery and commitment in the face of worried days and sleepless nights. I have been awestruck by the support these families provide for their loved ones and for the entire military community.

Unfortunately, 50 men with ties to Nevada have made the ultimate sacrifice. They are more than numbers, though. They are fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, and friends. They left behind families who will never be able to fill the void left by their deaths.

One-year-old Ethan Garrigus's only memories of his father will be from pictures and the teddy bear he left behind with a special recorded message. Ethan's father turned down assignments on American soil in order to serve a second tour in Iraq. He believed in his mission, and he wanted to protect his son and his wife and our way of life.

I want Ethan to know that we are so proud of his father and his unwavering commitment to freedom. Sergeant Garrigus gave his life for a cause greater than all of us. It is in his honor and in the name of the men and women who have died defending freedom throughout our history that we should pledge to work together for the good of Nevada and the good of this nation.

God bless all of them, God bless you, and God speed. Thank you.